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ABSTRACT

Intended for teachers, this paper considers response to student writing, looking at the different angles from which it is commonly perceived and acknowledging the complications that evaluation and the demands of curriculum add to that response. Three major areas are examined. There is an historical look at response, so that some of the roots of traditional approaches and assumptions can be seen. The highlights of the past decade are cited, including the angles from which traditional approaches have been attacked and through which current research is evolving. Finally, current ideas from research and teaching are discussed in order to assess what the state of the art is now and what needs to be considered for teaching and learning writing in the future. (DF)

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A Look At Response and The Teaching of Writing

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting
National Council of Teachers of English
(74th, Detroit, MI, November 16-21, 1984)

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When children learn to use language, they do so in large part by testing hypotheses about how to express ideas--"trying out" the language, as it were--then finding out how well they are being understood by others through the input or response they receive (see, for example, Clark and Clark, 1977; DeStefano,1978). This input or response from a language "audience" continues to bear on the language user, even into adulthood, and may be of as much consequence to the learner of written language as to the learner of spoken language. In fact, recent inquiry into response to writing points to response as being key to the acquisition of written language (see Freedman, 1983). It would be forcing things, however, to say that receiving response to writing is the same as receiving response to speaking if we view writing as a highly conscious, sometimes self-conscious, activity that is largely school- rather than home-learned, with response coming not mostly from parents and peers, but from teachers. Indeed, with teachers responding to student writing, judgement and response become intricately wed such that whether or not one has "measured up" on one's writing (with repercussions on one's success in a course) is part and parcel of the response one gets to that writing. We are all familiar with the situation in which the teacher points out that he doesn't grasp the intent of the student's second paragraph--feedback that indicates how the reader understands the writer's text--and then writes "C" at the end of the paper--the judgement that the student hasn't quite met the standards. So, while part of a cognitive coupling in which writing/response equals one

completed communicative event, response to writing, in school anyway, also often constitutes a point along an evaluation continuum from which a student sees with greater or lesser impact how she is progressing in the academic setting according to those who make the academic rules. The teacher's responsibility in responding to a student's writing, then, is complex and burdensome. Not only that, but it has never been clear-cut how best to execute the responsibility. The proliferation of conflicting advice (compare, for example, Hirsh and Elbow on pp. 7 and 14) attest to this point. As recently as 1982, in a comprehensive review of studies dealing with response to student writing, Griffin wonders whether even now we have a response theory behind all our research, and implies that we do not.

As with many of our cultural institutions, however, it is tradition that is often our strongest guide, molding our expectations and dictating our behavior. The standing tradition for teachers of writing has it that they are to expect from the student a great deal of incompetence and that they are to respond by making the incompetences known to the student, expecting for themselves along the way many hours of toil. Much of the recent research and philosophy in response practice is aimed at cutting through the prevailing tradition, emphasizing the writer behind the "incompetence" (for example, Elbow, 1973; Shaughnessy, 1977; Sommers, 1982) and the process of writing as much as the product (for example, Moffett, 1968; Garrison, 1974). But the teacher's responsibility is no less complex, the task is no less burdensome, and it is still not clear-cut how best to execute it.

The aim of this paper is to consider response to student writing, looking at the different angles from which we commonly perceive it and acknowledging the complications that evaluation and the demands of curriculum add to response. Entailed in examining these concerns are an historical look at response, so we can see at least some of the roots of the traditional approaches and assumptions; a look at highlights of the past decade, so we can see not only from what angles that tradition has been attacked but through what angles current research is evolving; and a look at current ideas from research and teaching, so we can assess where we are now and what we need to consider for teaching and learning writing in the future.

An Historical Look

From the last 100 years or so we get the idea that reading and responding to student papers meant, more than anything else, long hours for the teacher, whose role was that of corrector of errors. In the nineteenth century, Alexander Bain, Professor of Logic and Rhetoric at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, wrote, "Everyone that has had to examine essays . . . knows the exceeding difficulty of assigning marks to an [essay] whose merits and demerits take so many directions at once" (in Lunsford, 1981, p. 435). Bain took the easy way out, making the decision not to assign essay writing, largely because of the difficulty of teaching and responding to the diversity of skills that one employs when writing. An 1892 report from the U.S. Bureau of Education indicated that the job of responding to students' papers was "grueling and fatiguing work" even though it

was recognized that student writing should receive careful and appropriate criticism " (p. 88). Just how that was to be accomplished was not specified.[1] A U.S. Department of Interior Bulletin from 1917 reminded English teachers of grades ten to twelve that the demands on them had consequences both in and outside their own department: "The teacher of subjects other than English demands that the work be clear and substantially correct in spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. Failing to secure the first, he lowers the pupil's mark, and, at his option, demands revision; . . . the teacher of English insists that every piece of writing [that is, in all subjects] shall be regarded as an English theme to be corrected, revised, and rewritten . . . ." They called this "corrective cooperation" (p. 131) and it undoubtedly meant a lot of tedious work. That the workload was heavy did not go unnoticed. In 1939, Phil S. Grant, secretary of the Committee on Subject A at the University of California, Berkeley, was quoted in the Daily Californian on the failure of high school composition courses: "In many cases where composition is taught [in the high schools] the fault lies mainly with the handicaps facing teachers who have to correct the work of seven classes in one day."

There is in the historical record, however, some indication that response practice did not need to be limited to hours of "correcting." It could be varied, the teacher's load lightened with sound pedagogy behind the non-traditional methods. For instance, William Spalding, chair at Edinburgh from 1840 to 1845, was, by their sixth essay, having students comment on each other's papers (in Lunsford, 1981). And the 1392 report cited

above suggested that in the eighth and ninth grades the students' work be presented to the class, with class criticism taking the place of teacher criticism since its effect would be "more marked than when the criticism comes from the teacher" (p. 40). (This sentiment was to be echoed by Moffett 50 years later.) Still, what trickled down to fairly recent times (CEEB, 1963) was an "ideal" reading of student writing in which the teacher was to read every paper, mark its "formal errors," and write thereon a "detailed comment," constructive and specific. The teacher was recognized as an "expert and sympathetic editor " (p. 84) who was to accompany even cursory readings (called "minimal readings") by marking errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and diction: "In the course of a year, the comment should make as coherent a progress as the classroom teaching, directing each writer to examine and correct his worst faults one by one, so that at the end of the year he can look back on measurable improvement . . and, ideally, after each paper is returned, the teacher should confer with its writer to make sure that corrections have been made and that the terminal comment is understood" (p.99). Short of accomplishing all this, the teacher, it was suggested, could have a reader to help out; the teacher could supply a grade rather than a comment for writing skills; the teacher could try sampling techniques; the student could correct his own "mechanical faults"; or the teacher could present a class demonstration of correction. What is of note is that the alternative methods suggested were regarded as somehow falling short of the "ideal" read-and-correct-all method, and implicit in

their being discussed was the belief that conscientious teachers would feel pangs of guilt in employing them. The ideal was still the ideal, no way around it. A few years later, a growing group of educators in the field would come to denounce the traditional read-and-correct methods, viewing a number of "alternatives" as better ways to go.

The Last Decade

The tradition of English teachers reading with a red pencil, pointing out or editing errors of grammar, diction, and spelling, is so deeply implanted in English education methodology that the stereotyped school marm, bespectacled, crotchety, and unable to see beyond her students' dangling participles, is a cultural phenomenon. Yet, as we shall see, the notion of response to writing as paper correction is limiting to both the student and the teacher.

The decade of the seventies (plus or minus a few years) saw some drastic changes in teaching methodologies, some of which, one suspects, were instituted because, simply, they shunned tradition, but many of which responded to the growing cultural awareness of the importance of the individual and his unique development within the greater culture. If the stereotyped pencil-wielding English teacher did not exactly disappear, at least some viable rivals evolved alongside her. Response to writing was no longer seen, simply, as paper-correction (plus toil for the teacher and confusion for the student). One of the stronger "rival" influences was that of Peter Elbow (1973) and others of his school of thought.

Elbow's ideas emerged at an important time politically in our culture. It was the early seventies when youth, especially, sought personal freedoms that would have been unthinkable in the immediately previous decades. As Elbow saw it, people were "trying to become less helpless" (p. vii), less dependent on others, more in control over their own lives. While the rhetoric even only ten years later sounds dated, Elbow's reflections on the culture at large had particular significance in the area of writing--both the teaching of it and the learning. For, according to Elbow's logic, in gaining control over one's life, one could also gain control over one's words. To Elbow, this was accomplished by, among other things, writing to and responding to an audience of peers, something that could be done whether or not one was in school. Thus was conceived the "teacherless" writing class, and response to writing that did not depend either on conventional wisdom about grammar, structure, and rhetoric, or on the teacher-authority-arbiter of acceptable prose. Rather, response was in the hands of a heterogeneous group of seven to twelve peers whose reactions to one's writing were to be personal, idiosyncratic, and "not attempts to gain some general or correct perception of the words" (p. ix). If there was a teacher, he was seen as a learner just like the students, all responding to a piece of writing by expressing their <u>experience</u> of the writing. Wrote Elbow, "to improve your writing you don't need advice about what changes to make; you don't need theories of what is good and bad writing. You need movies of people's minds while they read your words" (p. 77). To this end, Elbow made several suggestions: a reader must single out words or

phrases that he liked and those that he didn't like; a reader must summarize the writing for the writer in a single sentence, then a single word; a reader must tell the writer everything he experienced as he read (for example, "At first I felt confused when you said X, but then . . . " and so on); and, finally, a reader must "show," through metaphoric exercises, his reactions to the writing.

One might question, today, many of these response techniques. The metaphoric exercises especially seem out of phase with our notions of a reliable reader: "make the sound the writing inspires"; talk about the writing as if it were clothing--dungarees, miniskirt, jacket and tie; talk about the writing as if it were a vegetable. One might well ask what the point is to declare a piece of writing like a summer squash. Yet Elbow went a long way in making us aware of the reader-critic as someone on whom writing has a palpable impact. Audience-awareness is certainly heightened when the audience reacts visibly and audibly in any number of exotic ways. Furthermore, when one's audience extends beyond the audience-of-one, that is, the teacher, one is less liable to tailor one's writing to the likes and dislikes of that one person; one is less liable to write "teacher-pleasing" prose.

A major problem with Elbow's method of response is the question of what to do about structural and grammatical correctness. According to Elbow, writers can become more competent even though they make "bad mistakes in grammar"; further, only if "they want to write for an audience that insists

on standard English" (p.138) will they have to get outside help. His attitude seems, for the current decade, a bit too relaxed. While it has been shown that knowledge of grammar per se does not correlate with writing competency, to be in control of syntax and conventional forms allows one, among other things, to control tone, to avoid ambiguity, and to maneuver meaning in the subtlest of ways for the widest audience. Yet group response on a "feeling" level found its way into many a writing class as it offered a method of reader feedback that arranged priorities such that what one had to say, and the general impact of one's writing, were more important than any surface infelicities with which it might be afflicted. (See page 15 for more on Elbow.)

Elbow acknowledged the influence of Ken Macrorie, and indeed, one can see in Macrorie's "how to" books on writing (1970, then 1976, 1980) the seeds of Elbow's teacherless class. Macrorie introduced the notion of "the helping circle"--in less jargony terms, the peer response group. Response from a group, according to Macrorie, is one of the writer's greatest resources. He prescribed response techniques to draw in all members of the group who would both submit a piece of writing for the group to discuss and respond to everyone else's writing in "helpful" ways, essentially responding on a "feeling level" (for example, "I liked it. I was led along by all the unfriendly remarks about the people in church--and I believed them, maybe because of details like 'huge perspiration rings under the arms'--and it all began to get pretty ugly for me. . . . " [p. 80]). Macrorie emphasized responding to the honesty or truth of a piece of writing, that is, responding to whether or not it is "phony"

teacher-pleasing pretention, which he dubbed "Engfish." On grading he advised, give the highest grades to those folders that, at the end of the course, "have the greatest number of writings that have scored with the students and the teacher" (p. 263) during the course. Evaluation and judgement, then, were to be separated over time from response and based on the personal reactions of the group of responders, not on the externally defined worth of the writing itself.

Macrorie and Elbow dramatically introduced to the teaching of writing the expectation for great things from student writers. Responding not as correctors of papers but as interested readers, they tried to free students from the constraints of pleasing-the-teacher, the idea being that fluidity could come only when one disregarded the fear of erring in mechanics or grammar. Said Macrorie, a teacher has to get over the impulse to correct a sentence such as "I had too horse's" (1970, p. 71) when the student has otherwise brought the horses alive brilliantly. "The student gets the idea, 'All those corrections show he's more interested in my spelling than in what I say. So I won't bother to say anything I really mean.'" (p.71) While Macrorie's student may be leaping to drastic remedies for his not being adequately appreciated as a writer, Macrorie still raised an important issue: what <u>do</u> teacher responses tell a student about what's important?

Neither Macrorie nor Elbow invented the notion of peer response (remember Spalding in the nineteenth century); they simply brought to the group method more relaxed, tolerant, and

perhaps political postures. Before them, in 1968, James Moffett, in a less cavalier vein, also wrote about peer response in an intensive treatment of English curriculum for grades K-12. He, too, flouted the traditional approach that had teachers respond to writing with red pencils following some pre-conceived criteria for what constituted the "right" way to compose. Said Moffett, "I recommend teaching the student to write for the class group, which is the nearest thing to a contemporary world-at-large; accustoming him to have his themes read and discussed workshop fashion; and asking him to write about raw material from his own experience which he is motivated to write about and to invent an appropriate rhetoric for" (p. 12). Writers need direct feedback from others, said Moffett, because, simply, one writes for others, and as in any use of language, in writing there are social implications. An audience would be at once responders and coaches. The response would be "candid and specific" and so instruction would be "individual, relevant, and timely" (p. 193). Moffett recognized the importance of receiving and giving feedback of quality. Yet for the traditional guardian of quality, the teacher, to be sole audience, he felt, was hazardous, especially for teenagers, for whom a "significant adult" is <u>too</u> significant--being a substitute parent, civic authority, and grade giver. All these roles would cause a student to misuse the teacher's feedback, writing, for example, what she thought the teacher wanted, or writing grudgingly. Besides, said Moffett, the peer group generally holds great weight for an adolescent and the teacher would be wise to capitalize on this.

The big question, of course, regarding peer response groups is the question of quality--how valuable, how correct, is student feedback? Moffett felt that students could in fact do a lot for each other. In numbers, he said, lies impersonality. Thus, group reactions would tend to be impersonal and, hence, easier to heed. Further, group reactions establish a consensus; peers can be candid and authentic more easily than can teachers, who are "afraid" of their students. Peer response is in concert with the student's own concerns, whereas a teacher's might focus on something like technique that the student isn't ready to tackle; a student can't "write-off" peer response as nit-picky or insensitive, as he might a teacher's; also, in responding, students gain insights about their own writing. Moffett suggested, furthermore, that since most students' writing problems stem from ego-centricity, with the writing failing to take a reader's point of view (thus manifesting itself in misleading punctuation, confusing organization, omitted transitions, and so on), he needs to be made aware of his readers' needs, enlightenment that can come from peers perhaps more convincingly than from teachers. Where the teacher can help most, said Moffett, is in clarifying problems after students have raised them. He said that even fourth graders are good at spotting problems; they just need help in understanding what has caused them and how they can be solved. The teacher, said Moffett, can create an atmosphere of "informed collaboration" (p. 196).

While Moffett was not unlike Macrorie and Elbow in his

perception of the value to be had from peer response groups, he perceived also the value of this response during the writing process, before the final draft. This timing, when the advice can benefit the final product rather than come post hoc with unreliable carry-over to the next piece of writing, has come to be seen as crucial by composition researchers and instructors practicing today (including Elbow, 1981). Moffett saw small groups as acting like "editorial boards to prepare papers for some purpose" (p. 197). As for judging writing, he felt that the teacher should not give grades to individual papers but evaluate by general assessment each student's folder of work, nodding in this way to the constraints that school administration puts on teaching practice. So Moffett, too, separated evaluation from response, putting administrative concerns in one compartment and pedagogical concerns in another.

In 1977, E. D. Hirsch put a linguistic framework around composition, drawing a great deal on research from the sixties and seventies on oral and written language production and processing as well as on his own experience teaching college composition. He offered a new criterion for good writing, "relative readability" or "communicative efficiency," which he defined as "the most efficient communication of any semantic intention, whether it be conformist or individualistic. Some semantic intentions require prose that is complex and difficult to read. . . [viz. Faulkner]" (p. 75). It was mainly to relative readability, then, that a teacher should respond on a piece of student writing. This, of course, might show up in anything from development to grammatical structure. Hirsch suggested several

response techniques, all of which are subsumed under two general response methods--written commentary and teacher-aided revision. Said Hirsch, ". . . very probably written comments will turn out to be the most effective teaching device of all" (p. 159). To Hirsch, the advantages of written commentary are its individuality and its permanence: "The student can study the comment several times and in principle can learn something permanent from it" (p. 159). To this end Hirsch suggested: comment on just two or three points in any paper, those that are most important for the student at the time and that will be likely to bring about the greatest improvement in the student's next paper; comment in an encouraging manner; summarize the comments at the end of the paper; make it clear that the comments deal with the craft of writing and not with the teacher's personal tastes. In this last piece of advice we see a distinct veering away from the Elbow-Macrorie "feeling level" criticism. The medium of teacher-written comments rather than peer group reaction, though, is especially distinct from the Elbow-Macrorie (as well as Moffett) philosophy. One cannot overlook the fact that Hirsch (1977) and Macrorie at one point (1976) were writing only one year apart from one another. Beyond written teacher response, Hirsch had other suggestions for responding to a student paper, including having the entire class "publicly revise" (p. 162) the paper, and having the teacher read aloud from the student's paper and then test the class's understanding of what was read.

While Elbow and Macrorie might be criticized on the grounds

that they reflect the values of a generation now past, Hirsch, too, except for his suggestions for peer feedback and revision, might be criticized for leaning too far in another direction. The red pencil, even used selectively, may not ensure that communication has occurred between the teacher-critic and the student-writer. And while a valuable response tool because of its permanency, one can never be assured that a student will "study" the comment once, let alone several times.

The writer-take-charge approach to writing surfaced as the writer's best ally when, in 1981, Elbow counseled writers through the entire writing process, from idea conception to final draft polishing. Focusing once again on the adult writer working without a teacher, Elbow told the writer to go after response herself, arming herself with a battery of specific questions that address either the accepted criteria for good writing (for example, quality content, effective language) or the reader's personal reactions to the writing (echoes of 1973). As for when in the process, early or late, to approach someone for response, Elbow said the decision depends on how much feedback the writer herself wants. In other words, Elbow assumed of the writer a sense of responsibility and a will about writing that has her a kind of self-teacher. The more usual angle, with the writer acquiring writing skills through classroom instruction and teacher response got subordinated to this more independent notion. Yet Elbow did not neglect the classroom entirely. Devoting a chapter to writing for real teachers, he advised students to guide their teachers' feedback, asking for comments on those points they particularly want response to. Even in the

classroom, then, Elbow's writers were told that for response to be most valuable, it is the writer who must be in charge.

Suffice to say, the work done on student writing has been varied. Not only that, the different approaches have all, over the years, made their way into real classrooms, with real students facing real teachers, whether sitting in circles or receiving missives appended to their written work. It is now time to reflect on these approaches and to consider more recent literature in just these areas, as well as others, literature that questions both traditional and non-traditional methods in an attempt to understand better the role of response in learning to write and its effects on both the student and the teacher.

Recent Literature on Response

Introduction

Research and ideas on response to writing have proliferated over the last few years. Several things are undoubtedly responsible for this interest, not the least of which are those same concerns that, manifest as character deficits, have defined the stereotyped English teacher: the overburdened teacher-reader and the reader-as-corrector. Many alternatives to traditional response practice have been tried and tested with the end in mind of lightening the teacher's load, especially because one has always suspected that indeed students may not benefit from (or care about) all that input from the teacher. Other alternatives have been studied as correctness came to be challenged as an absolute and its value questioned in light of the emerging general awareness of more intrinsic values, such as the

importance of one's ideas, the soundness of one's logic, and the communicative context in which writing plays a role (in this last area, see, for example, Shuy [1981]; Heath [1982]). But traditional response practice has, perhaps more importantly, been questioned and alternatives tried as a result of research in cognitive processes and the movement away from looking solely at, and judging, the written text and toward, instead, looking at the writer behind the text and the process she goes through in creating it, a process that entails at least some awareness of a complementary reader-responder.

One might, then, review the work on response from any number of angles. One might look at response according to what in the writing is addressed in a teacher's response, that is, whether content, form, or all possible combinations thereof are addressed. Or one might look at it according to who is responding--teacher, peer, tutor, self, or even computer. One could also look at mode of response--paper marking, teacher-student conferences, peer groups, class discussion. Obviously these are not mutually exclusive categories: the teacher, for instance, might be the responder, meeting with the student in conference and judging the student's final draft on its logic and organization. Is it more important that it is the teacher responding, that response occurs in conference, that it is to a final draft, or that it is selective and focused? One might well answer, "It all depends," and what it all depends on can be as elusive as the teacher's personal style. Rather than take an angle, then, I present the research as a gestalt, noting the

trends and interests that emerge and bringing us up to modern times.

Review

Perhaps the most common concern among researchers and among writing instructors has been the student's paper itself and how teachers respond to it. The studies that address this concern often focus on what in the papers teachers respond to and what the nature of the response is. An oft-cited study by Gee (1972), for example, investigated the effects of three conditions--praise, negative comment, and no comment--on the expository compositions of eleventh-grade students. Gee found that praised students had more positive attitudes toward writing than students who were criticized or who received no comment at all. This finding is hardly surprising.[2] Yet, in spite of the obviousness of Gee's finding, one must not slight the importance to pedagogy of negative vs. positive feedback. When Harris (1977) had high school English teachers read and mark twelve selected student themes, she found that 60% of end-of-paper comments were negative, 40% were positive, and of the annotations made within the papers as teachers read and marked, only .007% were positive annotations. This gives one pause and one might well ask what the impact could be on students in non-experimental situations, that is, in real classrooms, of so much negative response to their writing.

A study by Searle and Dillon (1980) also comments on negative vs. positive feedback, but in ways that give the concepts "negative" and "positive" some context by including

whether response was to form or to content. The purpose of their study was to describe teacher-written responses to student writing in the upper elementary grades (4-6). They collected 135 pieces of writing from nine teachers, getting five randomly selected students each. They then categorized teacher responses in two ways: (1) whether they focused on form or content, and (2) what the types of response were (that is, evaluative, instructive, and so on). In addition, the teachers filled out a questionnaire. In the questionnaire, teachers reported that the most frequently used format for response was written comments on student papers, and that their criteria for good writing were mechanics, language structure and style. Content as a criterion was conspicuously absent. Further, these criteria were reflected in the teachers' responses to the 135 essays. Briefly, 84% of the responses to content were general pat-on-the-back comments (for example, "good," "excellent"), the remarks tending to be stereotyped according to teacher; most responses were to mechanics; mechanical errors tended to be corrected; structural errors were noted but seldom corrected; comments on mechanical errors tended to be negative; comments on style tended to be positive. Searle and Dennis felt that the message about language which these teachers communciated was that how you say it is more important than what you say. This study is just one of several that have come to similar conclusions.

In the Harris study (1977) cited earlier, for instance, it was found that while most of the teachers placed more weight on content and organization than on sentence structure, mechanics, or usage when they explained how they rank-ordered by preference

the twelve essays in the study (and also when they responded to Harris' questionnaire), in actual practice, that is in marking and commenting on the twelve papers, content and organization were not emphasized over the other categories. Harris found the greatest number of corrections and annotations devoted to mechanics and usage, and "mechanics and usage emerged as a dominant factor in the teachers' judgment of quality" (p. 180). According to Harris, a possible reason for this is that form is an integral part of content--when form is poor, the quality of the content seems to be affected. What Harris neglects to mention, however, is that while teachers actually may prefer essays with quality content over those that are just formally correct, it is easier to talk about and comment on matters of form. Of course, the message to the student is that since the teacher has responded to form, she must place more importance on it.

Looking also at the issue of form versus content, but adding the dimension of experienced versus inexperienced teachers of writing, Siegel (1982) addressed the current trend in many colleges and universities toward having faculty from departments other than English teach writing. She performed a study at Temple University in which eight experienced and expert composition teachers from the English department and seven new teachers of composition from other departments at the university commented on and graded thirty-five student papers in order to ascertain those areas in which new writing instructors might benefit from special training. Her findings indicated that all

teachers, both new and experienced, showed teacher-to-teacher inconsistencies in assigning letter grades and that all teachers, both new and experienced, tended to mark the same number of errors when they were looking at form as opposed to content (although new teachers often marked or changed things that didn't need changing). However, important differences emerged in response to content. The experienced English teachers commented on content almost three times as much as the new teachers and, more importantly, these comments tended to be written in a personal, expository manner (the kinds of comments that Sommers [1981] found students respond best to). What Siegel's study points to is that experienced teacher response to student writing reflects a sense of priority: it is more important and effective to respond to some errors or weaknesses rather than others. Content is high on the priority list. Further, the experienced teachers in this study concentrated on only two kinds of formal errors: "those which look very bad to a reader but are actually relatively easy to correct" (for example, misspelling, aberrant capitalization) and "those errors whose correction involves the student's internalizing relatively difficult rules or habits" (for example, faulty agreement, vague pronoun reference, wordiness) (p. 304). (See Freedman, 1979.)

One of the major criticisms of traditional teacher responses to student writing is that, whether positive or negative, whether addressing form or content, they are not always understood by the students to whom they are addressed. In explaining his response techniques for remedial students, Butler (1980) points out that comments and squiggles that teachers make on student papers,

although they carry a great deal of meaning for the teacher, often carry no meaning for the student. Butler is addressing the needs of remedial students, but the problem extends often to other students as well: when a teacher underlines an error or puts a question mark in the margin, will the student know what's behind that "simple" notation? Like Butler, Hahn (1981) found when he interviewed nine students about specific papers they had written and comments they had received from their teachers, that students cannot learn from comments they cannot read or understand and frequently, indeed, they cannot read or understand teachers' comments. Says Hahn, "The game becomes 'Here's what you did wrong in your last paper. Now do a different paper and see what I can mark wrong this time'" (p. 9). Butler's solution for remedial students is to comment on students' ideas ("nice," "I see your point," "I'm not sure I really understand") without marking the many errors of form that inevitably appear: "We'll naturlly your'll act different in each place, but you can still be yourself in each Place" (p. 275) (cf. Macrorie). The student, says Butler, often doesn't see these errors even if they're pointed out in red ink. In reading their papers aloud, these writers usually spontaneously read not what's on the page--for example, "your'll"--but what's in their head--"you'll." So Butler feels that they cannot benefit from traditional comments on their papers. Such comments, then, are not only a waste of the teacher's time, but can harm the student by discouraging him: he sees a sea of red marks yet doesn't have the key to why his writing is faulty.

Not understanding a teacher's comment has different implications for the higher level student. In a study that has both students and professors (on the college level) react to the quality and effectiveness of different pieces of writing, the criticism that students don't always understand what their teachers mean in their written responses is borne out in many ways. Schwartz (1984) asked twenty-two faculty in different disciplines to read several paired passages (labeled A and B) and to choose the ones in each pair that they preferred. She then asked 105 students representing sixteen majors to read the same passages and (1) choose which ones they thought their professors would prefer, and (2) choose which ones they preferred. What she discovered was that professors have varied preferences but that students are not necessarily attuned to what they are, seeing professor response in a highly generalized, de-contextualized way. She found that professors might like either A or B in a given pair and would often offer the same reasons for their preference, the A supporter and the B supporter both saying that their choice was the "clearer" or the more "descriptive," for example. She also found that, while the professors differed about their preferences (and discipline was shown not to influence their choices), students invariably thought that all their professors would prefer those passages that used big words, were impersonal, were longer, and were on the surface "correct" even if they were uninteresting and even if the students themselves preferred other passages. Schwartz concludes that teachers' code words such as "clear," "wordy," and "descriptive," do not have universally-accepted definitions: what's "clear" for

one professor is not for another. It is no wonder that students are confused by their instructors' marginalia. Schwartz contends that teachers, in response to writing, "must play more the role of reader than of judge, asking questions such as 'I don't understand why . . .' rather than making pronouncements such as 'too vague' or 'too wordy'" (p. 61). Students need to write to 'real readers whose real questions and confusions must be clarified" (p. 61). Response to student writing must be in the context of its purpose and its audience.

What emerges over the years from the studies on how teachers respond to students' papers, then, is the notion that, because a real writer is behind the text (with all its errors), and because a real reader is behind the teacher response, the two need to get together in some way so that the writer can address what the reader needs in a written text and the reader, in responding, can address what it is the writer wants to communicate. Schwartz's study of professors and students reveals quite forcefully those needs. Other similar studies, enlightening in various ways on the nature of response, come to similar conclusions.

One of the better-known and more telling studies recently on teacher response to student writing is Nancy Sommers' (1982) look at the comments made by thirty-five New York University and University of Oklahoma writing instructors and one Bell Laboratories computer program (Writer's Workbench) on the same set of three student essays. Any apprehensions that one might have had about the efficacy of teachers' written comments are confirmed by Sommers' findings. Besides concluding that the

computer's responses were "calm" and "reasonable" compared to the teachers', which Sommers calls hostile and mean-spirited, she also came to two important conclusions that reflect on the fact that teachers do not always understand how to respond constructively and effectively to their students' written language. First, teacher comments tended to draw attention away from the student's purposes in writing a particular text and toward the teacher's purpose in commenting. Sommers calls this "appropriation of the text by the teacher" (p. 150) and says that this happens when, for example, teachers mark errors in usage, diction, and style on a first draft as if these are the important considerations when revising a text. But as Sommers points out, if a whole paragraph is to be redeveloped, then chances are the phrases marked for usage will change anyway. She found that interlinear comments addressed editing needs while marginal comments addressed global concerns and the two often conflicted: to change, say, paragraph development, might mean to get rid of the sentence that was marked as needing a grammatical change. The second finding was that "most comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text" (p. 152). As is revealed in Schwartz's study, general comments such as "be specific," and "needs clarification," can be interpreted any which way and don't help the student to understand what a reader needs from her text. (In fact, Hahn, cited earlier, found that students perceived the response "unclear" to reflect more the teacher's problem in understanding than their own problem in communicating.) Teachers need to distinguish, too, between response to a final draft and response to a rough draft. In

interviewing these teachers, Schwartz found out that they had had little training in responding to student writing and thus were not making these kinds of essential distinctions in their response.

Especially helpful descriptions of response come from Lees (1979) and Purves (1984). Their taxonomies of teacher response should clarify for teachers and researchers alike exactly what teachers are doing pedagogically for their students when they respond as they do to their writing. Purves describes the roles teachers take in responding to student writing and the purposes attached to those roles. As "common readers," he says, their only purpose is to respond to the writing with, for example, pleasure or interest. As proof-readers, editors, reviewers, or gatekeepers, their purpose is to judge the writing and the writer. As critics, anthropologists, linguists, or psychologists, their purpose is to improve the writer or the writing. Teachers take on this whole spectrum of roles and Purves urges teachers to indicate them to their students; students in turn must learn to deal with all these kinds of readers. Says Purves, "text is read variously not only by different people for different purposes, but also variously by the same reader" (p. 265). Lees divides commenting into seven modes: correcting, emoting, describing, suggesting, questioning, reminding, and assigning. The first three, she says, put the burden of work on the teacher; the next four shift some of the burden to the student. According to Lees, much emoting, correcting, and describing are useless. Teachers should respond to papers so that they "foster . . . tension between what they

[the students] have written and the better, but so far unseen, things they may be capable of writing" (p. 374).

Even when, as Lees suggests they do, teachers do respond so as to shift the burden to the student, if their responses "suggest," "question," and "remind," one still must ask toward what ideal these responses are directed. That is, what, for example, might the teacher have in mind as an answer when he poses a question on a student paper? Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) remind us of one of the built-in ironies of school writing which makes this question particularly pertinent. The irony is this: unlike ordinary readers, who approach a text believing in the writer's authority and willing therefore to go along with his way of expressing ideas (Purves' "common reader"), teacher-readers approach student-produced text believing in their own authority and intellectual maturity over the student writer's. While teachers do know more than students, something Brannon and Knoblauch don't dwell on, it is shown in their study that teachers feel free not only to control the choices that the student-writer makes but to correct them when they deviate from the teacher-reader's sense of what would be the "ideal text" for the student to have produced. (Brannon and Knoblauch use the term "ideal text" to mean the teacher's singular version and vision of the best realization of a writing task; it is used more pejoratively than when "ideal text" means, generally, a goal that the teacher is aiming his students toward.)

In their research, that had forty teachers assess the quality of writing in a student essay whose topic was the Lindbergh kidnapping trial, the teachers were found to divide

into two groups: those who felt the writing was too emotional and those who felt that it was excellent because the emotional style revealed good satire. What's important to see here is that neither group saw the writing for what it was. Rather, they compared it to some "ideal text" that they carried in their heads that excluded emotional writing: when emotion occurred, it had to be either wrong or intentionally satirical.

One might argue that the problem was not with teachers carrying around an "ideal text" but with what their ideal consisted of. Nevertheless, Brannon and Knoblauch ask, with some justification, for teachers to change their approach to response, giving up their "ideal models" and focusing instead on their student-writers' own intentions for their writing. Response methods that would be suitable to such a stance, they suggest, include one-to-one conferences, peer response groups, and "certain kinds of comments on student essays" (p. 163) such as questions that probe the writer's intent (italics mine). Multiple-draft assignments, because they place emphasis on revision, regarding errors as opportunities for refinement, also suit response that measures the writer's product against her original intentions. The point is that response be geared not toward the teacher's vision but toward the student's, whatever the mode. While this interpretation of the teacher's role may be a bit naive, since the teacher's vision should be "better" than the student's much of the time, still, when we speak of response that probes the writer's intent we get far away from seeing the teacher-as-corrector as the only model of response.

Perhaps one of the most heart-warming indications of a broadening sense of response roles is the work done in error analysis (for example, Shaughnessy, 1977; Kroll and Schafer, 1978; Bartholomae, 1980). Rather than seeing errors in grammar and mechanics as those undesirable occurences in a student text that need correction, researchers and writing teachers have become more and more concerned with why these errors occur, seeing them as windows into the writer's mind. Just as miscue analysis in reading research has alerted us to the meaningful nature of reading errors (see, for example, Goodman and Burke, 1974), unconventional features in student writing have come to be viewed as evidence of the student's intention and therefore as meaningful.

Response to grammatical problems using an error-analytical approach is response that looks at the writer as he's attempting to communicate, not at the product as if it were simply a failed attempt. According to Bartholomae, "Error analysis allows us to place error in the context of composing and to interpret and classify systematic errors (p. 257). . . . we can help them [the students] begin to see those errors as evidence of hypotheses or strategies they have formed and, as a consequence, put them in a position to change, experiment, imagine other strategies" (p. 258). So, for example, using an error-analytical approach, a teacher would not conclude when she saw an incorrect verb form that the student was incompetent for not understanding the rules for indicating tense or number.[3] Rather, she could approach the verb forms as idiosyncratic systems with their own rules for tense and number, the writer being a competent language user.

Response such as that using error-analysis assumes that a piece of writing is evidence for the writer's having gone through a more or less elaborated writing process. One of the criticisms of earlier research on teacher response is that it failed to look at a student paper and the comments on it in conjunction with other writing activities such as pre-writing or revision that are designed to help students in this whole process of writing a paper. Hillocks (1982) suggested that it is short-sighted to see teacher comments as an event isolated from other teacher and student input in the process. In an experimental study of seventh and eighth graders, he measured the effects of three variables on writing improvement. One of the variables was length of teacher comment, one was focus of comment, and the other was pre-writing activity for the students. In analyzing his results, Hillocks found that overall mean gains for brief comment papers was the same as that for extensive comment papers. But when taken in conjunction with the other variables in his study, the picture changed. Students who had been given the pre-writing activity of observing data and participating in student-motivated class discussion (what Hillocks calls the "environmental" mode of teaching [1981]), coupled with receiving extensive comments on papers, showed the greatest significance in pre-test to post-test gains. Said Hillocks, "Longer comments with their increased number of specific suggestions may be more meaningful when they have been preceded by instruction which is related to their content" (p. 275). Indeed, when unaccompanied by pre-writing observation/ discussion, the long comments are apt

to be interpreted as "pejorative or punitive and may discourage seventh and eighth graders" (p. 275).

As can be inferred from Hillock's remarks, response that pre-supposes a writing process of some sort is usually part of a teaching methodology that uses the writing process as a pedagogical tool. We can think of process-oriented response as occurring at any point from the inception to the completion of a writing task, including any number of suitable response methods. For example, response can come via peer groups working with their rough drafts (cf. Moffett, 1968; Hill, 1974; Elbow, 1981). Or, as Gebhardt (1980) suggests, response can come from peer groups at the earliest stages of the writing process, when students are generating material, crystalizing a thesis, developing a sense of audience and voice, and organzing a draft, not just when they have a draft all ready for reading. Of course this makes of the writing more a collaborative effort among peers, thereby reducing the student's burden and, as Gebhardt points out, helping a student through the "emotional isolation" (p. 70) as well as the substantive difficulties associated with writing a paper.[4]

Garrison's (1974) version of this through-the-process response involves teacher and student in tutorial. His method has students spending the entire class period writing, while the instructor sits at a desk nearby ready to respond to the students' writing whenever they wish his help. This approach to response has the advantage of being highly individualized. It allows the student to spend a maximum amount of time writing and provides constant and almost immediate feedback. According to Garrison, "the teaching method in such a course is the

professional response of the instructor to how the student is working and what he has produced" (p. 62). It focuses on the writing process, response being to in-progress decisions as much as to the end product. And by eliminating teacher-to-classroom teaching, the traditional content of the writing course--that is, grammar, spelling, usage, and form--becomes functional to the individual piece of writing--its purpose, its author, its audience. (According to Garrison, this tutorial approach to response has a practical advantage, too, allowing instructors to handle class sections up to thirty-five students. While that seems a frightening number of students to carry in a writing course, it is certainly not unusual that a teacher would find herself with that heavy a load.)

McDonald (1978) and his colleagues at the University of Toledo have developed a "phased procedure for responding to different drafts" (p. 169) of a student essay, rather than responding once to a final version. The idea is that, on successive drafts, the teacher-responder can cover a scale of concerns, thereby allowing the writer to pay attention to only certain concerns on each draft. When teachers try to lighten a student's cognitive load by having him concentrate on only one thing in a particular paper (rather than draft) and then grading the finished paper primarily on that one thing, McDonald feels they and their students lose the experience of seeing the paper as a whole. McDonald's concerns begin with content, organization, and coherence, which he focuses on for first draft response. He moves on to sentence structure, usage, mechanics,

and grammar only much later in the draft stages, when content is fixed and when they won't assume a disproportionate importance to the student.[5] Experimental research by Beach (1979) supports the efficacy of between-draft response. In a study of 103 students in tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades, Beach found that when teachers responded to student writing in rough draft stage, final drafts showed higher fluency and greater support than when students did a guided self-evaluation in rough draft stage or when there was no rough draft evaluation at all.

Of course there are all sorts of permutations of process-oriented response, including teacher-as-editor, a la Maxwell Perkins (Kennedy, 1974); multiple-teacher response (Held and Rosenberg, 1983); self-evaluation (Lamberg, 1980); and teacher-student conferences (Freedman, 1983). They all may have a place in writing programs if one believes that thoughtful, reasoned response has a legitimate place in the language acquisition process. But when assessing the role of different modes of response, a great deal depends on the nature of the writing program that it is part of, as well as the nature of the students and teacher. These variables are not mentioned lightly. Any conclusions drawn about response to student writing must necessarily address them in some way.

Conclusion

Nothing is more real than reality. Let me begin a conclusion with a couple of anecdotes.

I. At the University of California, one must, as a freshman, take a semester of Subject A--once referred to not the

least bit affectionately as bonehead English--if one has not already met certain literacy requirements. What this amounts to is thirty-five to forty per cent of the freshman class spending fifteen weeks learning the ins and outs of writing expository essays, the idea being that this course will serve their four years writing at the University, not to mention their later lives when, the University presumes, they will want to analyze and criticize their adult worlds with at least a modicum of taste and acumen. In the fifteen weeks it is expected that thirty-five to forty percent of the freshman class will acquire university-level "proficiency" in writing English and composing an essay on an academic topic. What this suggests in terms of the curriculum goals of the University is that some notion of proficient writing performance drives the course, its content, and its methodology, and students are measured against a proficient-performance standard. This being the case, instructors are faced with a dilemma if they want to consider feedback learning as part of the course. Keeping in mind the goals of the course, they can try to respond to their students' writing in such a way that they dangle before them the carrot of ideal text (words, sentences, essays--the whole gamut), reminding them that they are aiming, essentially, toward matching their prose with this ideal. Or, through response methods conducive to collaboration, such as conferences, they can try to understand what their student writers want to accomplish in their texts and help them inch their prose toward these intentions. To understand the book or to grow into one's own cloak of communication, that is the question. Because of the curriculum constraints and because of the time

constraint of a fifteen-week semester, one is tempted to go solely for the book. In fact, for freshmen at the University this often works out just fine; that is, they acquire models and pass the course. But I am reminded of Lou, a Subject A student I taught recently who had so incorporated into his student baggage the rules and mores of his high school writing courses that he was utterly driven by these rules. His writing was often incomprehensible, for he was so worried about following the book that he neglected not only the sensibilities of his audience, but his own as well. His prose was what Linda Flower (1979) would call "writer-based." It seemed that response to his writing had to address his intentions and goals and had to alleviate for him the burden of measuring up to a false notion of ideal snuff. I tried to act accordingly and coached him through his drafts, and he passed the course (no flying colors). Not too long ago I got a phone call from Lou. He was now enrolled in Comparative Literature, had written a few papers, and had due, the next day, a paper analyzing the character of Nick in The Great Gatsby, no small task. He was desparate; his instructor had told him that his rough draft was "so terrible he wouldn't even read it," and he would fail the course if the paper due the next day wasn't "passing." Lou was back in his old bind--his process was worth nothing to his Comparative Literature instructor; his final draft was worth everything.

When does "acquiring" written language stop and showing it off begin? When does response to student writing stop addressing the student's linguistic development and begin to limit itself to

his scholarly contributions? Perhaps by the second year of college one should expect that a student has been language-trained and can behave like an adult writer in class. How long does it take to prepare for such an eventuality? The means to this end is not uncluttered or unconstrained: the problem of academic expectations, curriculum goals, grade-pressures, and semester-long courses is not exclusive to the university. I will tell one more story.

II. At a suburban Bay Area high school, the English department has recently undergone extensive curriculum changes under the guidance of the department head. Among other English courses that highlight writing in this new curriculum is one offered to ninth and tenth graders called Communications. Taught by the department head herself, this course focuses on both oral and written communication and is, perhaps even prototypically, a process-oriented course. Much pre-writing activity precedes draft writing, the students write multiple drafts for each assignment, and even the final draft is subject to last-minute changes before the teacher sees it. From the beginning to the end of each assignment block, students get response to their ideas and to their writing, mostly from peers, with whom they regularly meet in groups or in pairs. The teacher often emphasizes for the class the importance of each step in the writing process, reminding them that essays are, as the French know, "attempts" or "tries" at expressing ideas. When students ask whether she wants papers typed, whether she wants perfect spelling, whether she wants titles on essays, she carefully and cleverly diverts the focus of the questions from her wants to

their own perceptions of a reader's needs. This process orientation, with response that is employed to heighten the students' awareness of a broad audience that holds few "teacherly" expectations but rather ordinary-reader expectations for lucid text, is based on enlightened research and classroom experience regarding the development and acquisition of written language. Unfortunately there is an old fly in the academic ointment. For while the teacher may remind her students that "mistakes are never fatal when learning how to write," that an essay is, afterall, a "try," still, papers are graded and the grade is based on something rather traditional--effective writing. That is, as one student found out when he asked the teacher point-blank whether they were being graded on how hard they try, there is a point in the process when the old criteria come to bear. Students do not get E's for effort. They make A's, B's, C's, D's, or F's based on their meeting the expectations of the assignment. Either they meet them effectively or they don't.

These two stories are instructive in a least one respect: reality has it that traditional academic expectations--Macrorie and Moffett notwithstanding-- drive both curriculum and the evaluation of student achievement; as Applebee (1984) discovered in his study of the teaching of writing, the prevalent academic philosophy is often at odds with a process approach to writing.

Yet research and practice in effective response to writing ("process"-oriented or not) has already affected not only much in the way writing is taught in many schools and at many grade

levels, but also the way educators regard the development of writing skill. We know that learning to write means learning a written language and, as with the acquisition of any language, students must be able to test it against a responsive audience in order to develop it into an effective communicative tool. What we need now are ways to integrate what we know to be productive response methodology into the broader academic setting, where, often, many different drummers mark conflicting beats.

Endnotes

1. In a 1935 report by NCTE, "An Experience Curriculum in English," 323 pages are devoted to what to teach in the English classroom, yet not one word addresses how to respond to student writing. And in a 1954 NCTE publication, Language Arts for

Today's Children, the chapter that deals with writing explains almost everything the teacher needs to know about writing in the curriculum (including handwriting!), while response to writing is virtually neglected.

2. Interestingly, over the four-week span of the study, none of the students in any of the three groups showed significant differences in writing quality! There is a more serious flaw in this study than its uncovering of the obvious. It was performed in an experimental vacuum. Students rarely if ever receive all positive feedback from a teacher with no suggestions for improvement. Writing, furthermore, is usually accompanied by some teacher-student contact, however minimal, and some class discussion about writing. Gee's experiment was carried on in classes where no writing instruction was taking place at all during the four weeks. Thus response conditions were divorced of any contextual links.

3. Joseph Williams (The phenomenology of error. College Composition and Communication, 32, May, 1981 [152-168]) has an interest in response to errors that takes another tack. When we consciously look for them, he says, as writing instructors by trade invariably do, we find them. On the other hand, when we don't seek them, indeed when we don't consciously expect to find them--when we are reading Orwell, say, or E.B. White--we don't see them. Yet Williams demonstrates that the errors that writing manuals and English teachers typically inveigh against do, in fact, appear in the best writings of people like Orwell and White, even when that writing is itself about language, as

is Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" or White's Elements of Style. The problem, says Williams, is not that there is language error in professional writing, or that we fail to perceive it there, but that, when we respond to writing, we do so differently with our students' than with professionals', marking and exhorting against linguistic transgressions that, under more normal (or neutral) reading conditions, we don't even notice--in Williams' words, errors that we don't ordinarily "feel on our nerves" (p. 154).

4. Work in progress by Anne Gere elaborates on the collaborative nature of writing. Gere suggests that writing isn't the lonely, isolated task that romantics claim it to be (Conference on College Composition and Communication, New York, 1984).

5. Corroborating McDonald's sense of priorities, Freedman (Why do teachers give the grades they do? College Composition and Communication 30, May 1979 [161-165]) found in a study that had twelve college teachers evaluate student essays that had been re-written by the researcher to manipulate content, organization, mechanics, and sentence structure, that the teachers valued content above all, then organization, with mechanics and sentence structure valued last.

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